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SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: GOM AUTONOMY DELEGATION HOLDS
PRESS CONFERENCE BEFORE DEPARTURE

¶1. (SBU) The Moroccan delegation in Washington to discuss autonomy held a press conference in Rabat February 9 to discuss their meetings and Paris and Madrid and to brief local press on their effort. According to press accounts February 12, they disclosed no new details on the autonomy plan, but stressed that it was 80 percent complete and that consultations would be more widespread.

¶2. (U) Moroccan Minister of Interior Chakib Benmoussa, Foreign Minister-Delegate Taieb Fassi Fihri, Interior Minister-Delegate Fouad Ali El Himma, and the Director General of External Intelligence Yassine Mansouri held an informal press conference, discussing internal issues (septel) as well as the Sahara. El Himma confirmed that the delegation had not provided their European counterparts with a written draft of the Moroccan plan for autonomy in the Western Sahara. Instead, he noted, they shared with French and Spanish officials the general outlines of the proposal, which "will respect international law." He added that the government is currently considering referendum to vote on the proposed plan, but had not decided whether it would be held on a national or regional (Western Sahara) basis.

¶3. (U) The delegation noted that the plan would be an "enlarged autonomy," that would be a greater level of self government than existed in much of Europe. It was neither confederalism nor federalism and even less centralism and tied to overall GOM regionalization efforts. It will apply to the Western Sahara territory, which they maintained contained two-thirds of Sahrawi population. The delegation asserted that the plan was already widely consulted in Sahrawi society as well as within Morocco. They downplayed the value of engaging the Polisario. They deplored the effort last October at the UNSC to inject human rights issues into the debate.

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